

Mr. Gary L. Porter
Regional Historic Preservation Officer
GSA National Capital Region
301 7th Street, S.W., Room 7600
Washington, D.C. 20407

Dear Mr. Porter:

This is my formal submission as a member of the consulting party established by GSA last June to consider and comment on the Ariel Rios mural controversy. I'm copying other members of the consulting party because it seems a shame that there has been virtually no conversation among us. A healthy consultation would be something more than presenting isolated individual statements of "position." It might even lead to reflection, reconsideration, and mutual understanding.

I am Dorik Mechau, eldest son of painter Frank Mechau whose mural, "Dangers of The Mail," sparked the outcry to remove it and several other paintings in the Ariel Rios building.

By way of background to my comments related to the mural controversy and Section 106 process—a little personal history. Since coming to Alaska in 1968, I have come to know and be involved with many Alaska Natives during a period of extraordinary change in their lives: passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act; disappearance of BIA institutions; arrival of television throughout rural Alaska; degradation of traditional lifeways; efforts to advance bilingual education; erosion of subsistence opportunities and practices; rise of tribal governments; language and cultural revitalization, and so on. I have worked for a wide range of Native organizations, e.g. the Alaska Native Education Board, Alaska Native Foundation, Alaska Native Human Resources Development Program; and several village IRA Councils and non-profits. During the historic work of the Alaska Native Review Commission, sponsored by the Inuit Circumpolar Conference and the World Council of Indigenous Peoples, I served as coordinator and chief of staff for Commissioner Thomas Berger.

I provide this background because my interest in and commitment to the well-being of indigenous peoples are a reflection of values held by my father. I would like those who are demanding removal of the paintings in question to consider the possibility that they are wrong to assume negative racial motivations. Absent such assumptions, the paintings can and should be viewed and judged for their qualities as works of art.

If one is looking for other signals of intention, let me suggest that critics of "Dangers of The Mail" consider the 21 great Indian warriors and chiefs whose names frame the mural and the possible motives for their presence. All of them are known for their strenuous resistance to the westward expansion of whites. Their tribes: Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, Crow, Northern Cheyenne, Blackfoot, Northern Cheyenne, Shoshone, Lakota Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, Sioux/Dakota, Cheyenne, Oglala-Brule Sioux, Oglala Sioux,

Cheyenne, Oglala Sioux, Lakota Sioux, Kiowa, Cheyenne, Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, Nez Perce.

In my view, although these issues lie at the heart of the present controversy, strictly speaking they have little to do with the responsibilities of GSA under the National Historic Preservation Act. A formal demand has been made to remove certain paintings from the Ariel Rios Building, and the question is whether or not such an undertaking would have an adverse effect.

To cite GSA's web site (with which we're all familiar): "An adverse effect is found when an Undertaking may alter, directly or indirectly, any of the characteristics of a historic property for inclusion in the National Register in a manner that would diminish the integrity of the property's location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, or association." GSA has identified the potential alteration of the mural setting, whether through removal, covering or obscuring of the murals as a potential adverse effect and is conducting the consultation process to consider views concerning such effects.

The consultation will consider whether the present setting for the six murals in question is appropriate, i.e., whether the murals should be removed from the Ariel Rios Federal Building, or whether some other action can reasonably be taken to address objections to the murals."

With respect to removal I have two quite different reactions. The first is heartfelt; I would love to see my father's murals on permanent display in a suitable museum or public building—cared for and genuinely accessible to the public. I have never been pleased with their setting in the Ariel Rios Building. But these feelings give way to stronger and more mindful responses.

First, I do not see how GSA could possibly find defensible grounds for removal or obstruction of any of the paintings commissioned for installation in this building. For better or worse, by law they are integral to it and must be protected under NHPA.

Second, the dark shadow of impending censorship looms here. Is GSA prepared for the consequences of a decision to remove or obstruct any work of art for which they are responsible? Such a decision would reverberate across the country, an invitation to anyone determined to hide or get rid of a work they consider objectionable. This prospect of censorship is frightening. Once underway, history has well demonstrated its probable course. If we truly value freedom of expression, it must be protected even when we take exception to what's being expressed. That is what GSA must do.

Sincerely,

Dorik Mechau